DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 519 CS 208 542

AUTHOR Irmscher, William F.
TITLE Quality for All.
PUB DATE 18 Nov 83
NOTE 8p.; Presidential address presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (73rd, Denver, CO, November 18-23, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Needs; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; *Instructional Improvement; *Public Opinion; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teaching (Occupation)
IDENTIFIERS *Excellence in Education

ABSTRACT

As the theme of the 1983 convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, quality for all in education should be a continuing concern of educators, not a word revived during periods of crisis. While people often prefer the best quality available and affordable, one of the reasons quality in education has suffered is that people have concluded they cannot afford it. Perhaps the public would be more willing to pay if they thought they could get higher quality education, but many people are saying that they do not intend to pay for more of the same. The resulting credibility gap creates apathy and indifference on the part of parents and frustration and defensiveness on the part of teachers. Many reports on the state of education emphasize self-sufficiency in an increasingly technological age, with little mention of self-fulfillment. The actions recommended in these reports deal with external factors, things that can be adjusted, manipulated, legislated, without necessarily affecting the basic causes. Most educational improvements have resulted from a change in attitude. For the present, educators need to clarify their central motivation. Teachers' hesitation to voice their priorities, assumptions, and values gives others the opportunity to create less favorable impressions about teachers and teaching. The task of reform is not simple, but excellence cannot wait. English must be allowed to fulfill its role of providing completeness to education. Even under present conditions, teachers of the English language arts must provide quality--set high expectations--for all their students, regardless of characteristics. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Presidential Address: Opening General Session, 73rd Annual Convention
National Council of Teachers of English. Denver, Colorado, November 18, 1983

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

William F. Irmscher

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED248519

Quality for All

William F. Irmscher

The theme of the 1983 convention is "Quality for All." It states a conviction, as mottos often do. It concerns an attitude. It proposes a positive belief. It provides a guiding principle for teachers. It sets an aim for students. It encapsulates into three words an entire philosophy of education: we will do our best for all students. We will expect the best of all students within the limits of their abilities and physical capabilities, but we will encourage them to stretch those limits. As Jesse Jackson says, "Excellence is your best against the odds."

I chose the theme. I chose it more than two years ago. It is therefore not a direct response to the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education or to Action for Excellence, the report of the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, or to other recent high school studies whose proposals summon the schools and society to restore quality to education. I welcome the appropriateness of the topic in the context of what is now happening, but I want to emphasize that quality ought to be a continuing concern of educators, not a word we revive for periods of crisis. It ought to be an ultimate term for our discipline, a word whose opposite--lack of quality--represents the strongest reprimand. Quality ought to be an ethos that motivates and challenges our actions.

The National Commission on Excellence says that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people." The statement may be overly dramatic, but characteristically people don't pay attention to guarded pronouncements. I would, however, like to consider the

CS208542

theme "Quality for All," not in the spirit of crisis, but in the sober sense of a value that should inform our beliefs and practices as teachers of English and Language Arts.

Surely no one would understand "Quality for All" to mean "Poor Quality for All." The word implies a high degree of excellence; yet it may be used together with adjectives that produce a graded scale. We can speak of poor quality, fair quality, good quality, or high quality. Theodore Roethke has even touched upon a crucial irony: "An age can be judged by the quality of its failures," he writes. We often prefer the best quality if we can afford it and if we can get it. One of the reasons quality in education has suffered is that people have concluded they cannot afford it. Even the President's Commission, after declaring the "nation at risk," says that the government cannot afford to support education and places the primary responsibility for financing the schools on state and local officials. It adds: "We also call upon citizens to provide the financial support necessary to accomplish these purposes. Excellence costs. But in the long run mediocrity costs far more." I like the retort of A. Graham Down, the Executive Director of the Council of Basic Education: "One enemy of excellence," he says, "is cheapness." Need one say where the government stands?

Citizens have also replied. 87% of the citizens questioned in a Gallup Poll in August, 1983, said that they agreed with the conclusions of the National Commission's report, but when they were asked, "Would you be willing to pay more taxes to help raise the standard of education in the United States?" only 58% said "Yes."

Perhaps the public would be more willing to pay if it thought it could get higher quality in education. Things we're willing to pay for, however, are not always accessible. Many citizens are bluntly saying that they do not intend to pay for more of the same. The profession and the public seem to be at odds.

The profession faces a credibility gap; the public lacks confidence in the public schools. The result is apathy and indifference on the part of parents; frustration and defensiveness on the part of teachers. All of this is documented in a chapter of the Carnegie report entitled "Excellence: The Public Commitment," which concludes with this statement: "The high schools of the nation are only as strong as the communities of which they are a part. The renewal of the school must, quite literally, begin at home."

An organization like this one could possibly bridge the gap between the profession and the public, not just to explain our positions, but to listen to theirs as well. Parents and teachers should not be adversaries. The task is one of finding ways for parents and teachers, with mutual respect, to involve themselves in educating children. The Council now has a committee to consider ways to address this problem.

One of the needs for the present is for educators to clarify their central motivation: what are we about? What are we educating for? The Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, representing governors, legislators, business leaders, labor, and educators, makes clear its aim: "mobilizing the education system to teach new skills, so that new generations reach the high general level of education on which sustained economic growth depends. . . ." The report emphasizes competencies in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and reasoning, but makes no mention, as the President's Commission does, of knowing "our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding. . .

In short, most of the reports emphasize self-sufficiency in an increasingly technological age. Little is said about self-fulfillment. Little is said about quality of life beyond economic sufficiency. Yet a new publication entitled Learning Trends reminds us that "high tech" must be--and always has been--complemented by "high touch," a phrase coined to describe the need of the human being to find emotional fulfillment in an increasingly mechanized and impersonal

society--the capacity of the individual to withdraw at crucial moments to recover and ultimately survive. The answer to problems of technology is not more technology; it is the ability of human beings to renew their humanness and their humaneness. We must let English fulfill its role of providing completeness to education. We must teach competencies, but we must also help individuals find satisfaction through literature and creativity. English and the humanitites and the arts need not necessarily be supplanted by the new technology. In fact, we must maintain that they are now even more important for the well-being of society.

Governor James Hunt, chair of the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, prefaces the report of his Task Force with these remarks: "We have heard now from many directions about the problems of our schools. We have had an abundance of research, a plentiful supply of analysis and an impressive piling up of reports. Public concern is rising. What is needed now is action: action for excellence." The reports I have been referring to do not hesitate to use the word excellence, a word that suggests a strenuousness and rigor that quality does not. There is no such thing as "poor excellence." Despite the elitist connotations that many people insist upon attaching to the use of the word excellence, all of these reports protest that they are not advocating quality education for a select few only. They are seeking ways to strengthen the training of all citizens and to give all students access to quality education. The Paideia Proposal says very succinctly, "There are no unteachable children. There are only schools and teachers and parents who fail to teach them."

But what are the recommendations for action? Lengthen the school year, require homework, increase testing of students and teachers alike, raise graduation requirements from high school and admission standards to college, improve textbooks, strengthen the curriculum, end grade inflation, raise teachers' salaries, encourage merit-pay systems, and enforce discipline. Some of these

recommendations are desirable; some debatable; some unrealistic. Or at least improbable. What impresses me about all of them, however, is that they deal with external factors, things that can be adjusted, manipulated, legislated, without necessarily affecting the basic causes. I don't deny a stimulus-and-response relationship: raise my salary, and I'm likely to have renewed incentive. Yet the remedies that are suggested do not adequately address the depth of the problem.

Let me cite my own experience: any weak class I have ever taken has been attributable to the teacher. Any good class I have known has been attributable to the teacher. If things are going to get better in education, I will place my hopes on people, not programs or practices. Ruth Love, general superintendent of Chicago schools, in responding to The Paideia Proposal writes: "The role of the teacher is the key to the entire reform, and an acknowledgment of the necessary development and continuous education of the teacher reflects the prominence of the teacher in the learning process."

In its special report on public schools in 1981, Newsweek magazine, after reporting on the undisputed importance of a school climate "where learning becomes invigorating," adds this observation: "The role of money in shaping a good school is more ambiguous; more of it may help, but not necessarily--and less doesn't necessarily cripple, as parochial schools with their threadbare budgets can testify."

What will make a difference? Let me say that any educational improvement I have ever witnessed, whether in an individual, a department, or a school, has resulted from a change in attitude. Maybe conditions must change first--classes get smaller or salaries larger. Maybe obstacles need to be removed--discipline enforced or paperwork reduced. But a change in quality, that sense of inner conviction of which I've already spoken, does not occur until people begin to think and feel differently about what they are doing. It will not occur until

teachers sense that the rewards of teaching offset the stresses and they are able to sustain the impulse to teach well.

As teachers, we therefore need to examine ourselves--what priorities we set, what values we esteem, what assumptions we hold. Do we ever voice the basic beliefs that we hold as teachers, those unspoken, self-evident ones that represent a kind of catechism? If we did, would they sound anything like these?

Knowledge is preferable to ignorance: that's why we teach.

Teaching and learning are intellectual experiences.

Teaching is a worthwhile way to make a living.

Not everyone is qualified to teach.

Teaching requires patience, compassion, and endurance.

Teaching is a full-time job.

Teaching demands commitment and hard work.

Incompetence shows.

All students are educable.

Teachers cannot do what students will not let them.

"Good enough" is not good enough as a measure of achievement.

Excellence is a value to honor.

I deliberated a long time whether to say these things that to many of you are all too obvious, but I think our hesitation, upon occasion, to say the obvious, at least about those things that are fundamental, gives others the opportunity to create quite different impressions about teachers and teaching. Let me give you just two examples I encountered recently, one in the newspaper and the other on TV.

One teacher who spins off a whole list of moonlighting activities to supplement his salary of $24,500 says: "In opposition to my more militant cohorts who believe teaching owes them a living, I believe that teaching gives

me time to do other things . . . I wouldn't trade places with anybody."

In a general discussion about school on 60 Minutes, another teacher says, "I think the kitchen workers in the school contribute as much to the education of children as teachers."

Views such as these and their variants are, I fear, more widespread than we would care to believe. Schools--or is it the unions?--continue to foster a policy of protecting incompetence. And colleges and universities continue to train people who are unsuited for the profession because more qualified candidates are not available. In view of such circumstances, is it any wonder that respect for teachers as knowledgable, authoritative figures in the community is no longer culturally engrained? The report on secondary education in America by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is one of the most understanding of the plight of teachers. Yet it says with unqualified directness: "Excellence in education will be achieved only as we invest in the education of teachers in the classroom."

The task of reform is not simple. But excellence cannot wait. Ernest Boyer writes: "Every morning at 8 a.m. the doors of America's high schools are opened. Walk inside and look into the future of the nation." Even under present conditions, teachers of English and Language Arts must provide quality--set high expectations--for all: for stellar students, who are often pushing for some unattainable goal of perfection; for nondescript, average students, who often are not as nondescript as they seem, once they have discovered their niche in life; for the handicapped, disabled, and disadvantaged students, whose reach may exceed their grasp, yet who come to know the joy of accomplishment. What is sad to contemplate is the stunted hopes of the unprepared. We must believe that quality in education is an investment in a better life for all those whom we teach.